

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35890-3 - The Palm and the Pleiades: Initiation and Cosmology in Northwest Amazonia

Stephen Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology

General Editor: Jack Goody

24

THE PALM AND THE PLEIADES

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35890-3 - The Palm and the Pleiades: Initiation and Cosmology in Northwest Amazonia
Stephen Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

OTHER TITLES IN THE SERIES

- 1 *The Political Organization of Unyamwezi*
R. G. Abrahams
- 2 *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*
S. J. Tambiah
- 3 *Kalahari Village Politics: An African Democracy*
Adam Kuper
- 4 *The Rope of Moka: Big-men and Ceremonial Exchange in Mount Hagen, New Guinea*
Andrew Strathern
- 5 *The Majangir: Ecology and Society of a Southwest Ethiopian People*
Jack Stauder
- 6 *Buddhist Monk, Buddhist Layman: A Study of Urban Monastic Organization in Central Thailand*
Jane Bunnag
- 7 *Contexts of Kinship: An Essay in the Family Sociology of the Gonja of Northern Ghana*
Esther N. Goody
- 8 *Marriage among a Matrilineal Elite: A Family Study of Ghanaian Senior Civil Servants*
Christine Oppong
- 9 *Elite Politics in Rural India: Political Stratification and Political Alliances in Western Maharashtra*
Anthony T. Carter
- 10 *Women and Property in Morocco: Their Changing Relation to the Process of Social Stratification in the Middle Atlas*
Vanessa Maher
- 11 *Rethinking Symbolism*
Dan Sperber
- 12 *Resources and Population: A Study of the Gurungs of Nepal*
Alan MacFarlane
- 13 *Mediterranean Family Structures*
J. G. Peristiany (ed.)
- 14 *Spirits of Protest: Spirit Mediums and the Articulation of Consensus among the Zezuru of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe)*
Peter Fry
- 15 *World Conquerer and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*
S. J. Tambiah
- 16 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*
Pierre Bourdieu
- 17 *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain*
Jack Goody
- 18 *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology*
Maurice Godelier
- 19 *The Fate of Shechem, or the Politics of Sex: Essays in the Anthropology of the Mediterranean*
Julian Pitt-Rivers
- 20 *People of the Zongo: The Transformation of Ethnic Identities in Ghana*
Enid Schildkrout
- 21 *Casting Out Anger: Religion among the Taita of Kenya*
Grace Harris
- 22 *Rituals of the Kandyan State*
H. L. Seneviratne
- 23 *Australian Kin Classification*
Harold W. Scheffler

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35890-3 - The Palm and the Pleiades: Initiation and Cosmology in Northwest Amazonia

Stephen Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

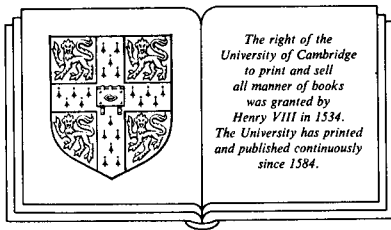
[More information](#)

The Palm and the Pleiades

INITIATION AND COSMOLOGY IN NORTHWEST AMAZONIA

STEPHEN HUGH-JONES

Lecturer in Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE
MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-35890-3 - The Palm and the Pleiades: Initiation and Cosmology in Northwest Amazonia
Stephen Hugh-Jones
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521219525

© Cambridge University Press 1979

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1979
First paperback edition 1988
Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2007

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Hugh-Jones, Stephen, 1945–
The Palm and the Pleiades.

(Cambridge studies in social anthropology; 24)

Based on the author's thesis, Cambridge University, 1974,
which was presented under title: Male initiation and cosmology
among the Barasana Indians of the Vaupés area of Colombia.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Barasana Indians – Rites and ceremonies.
2. Barasana Indians – Religion and mythology.
3. Indians of South America – Colombia – Rites and ceremonies.
4. Indians of South America – Colombia – Religion and mythology.

I. Title.

F2270.2.B27H83 390'.098 78–5533

ISBN 978-0-521-21952-5 hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-35890-3 paperback

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35890-3 - The Palm and the Pleiades: Initiation and Cosmology in Northwest Amazonia

Stephen Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

FOR LEO AND TOM

CONTENTS

<i>List of tables and figures</i>	<i>page</i>	ix
<i>List of maps and plates</i>		x
<i>Preface</i>		xi
<i>Orthography</i>		xvi
<i>Part I The rites in context</i>		1
1 Introduction		3
2 The Barasana: land and people		18
<i>Part II The rites described</i>		39
3 Fruit House		41
4 <i>He</i> House: the main initiation rite		69
<i>Part III Explanation and analysis</i>		103
5 The participants		105
6 The flutes and trumpets		134
7 The gourd of beeswax		163
8 Open and closed: the howler monkey and the sloth		193
9 Death and rebirth		214
10 The Sun and the Moon		227
<i>Part IV Conclusion</i>		239
11 Conclusion		241
<i>Part V The myths</i>		261
M.1 <i>Romi Kumu</i>		263
M.2 <i>Ayawa</i> , the Thunders		267

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35890-3 - The Palm and the Pleiades: Initiation and Cosmology in Northwest Amazonia

Stephen Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

M.3 Sun and Moon; day and night	272
M.4 <i>Warimi</i>	274
M.5 <i>He</i> Anaconda	284
M.6 Manioc-stick Anaconda	287
M.7 <i>Yeba</i>	295
M.8 The Thunders and Juruparí	302

Appendixes

1 Descriptions of Yurupary rites – a list of sources	309
2 Yurupary myths – a list of sources	310
3 The playing of Barasana <i>He</i> instruments	311

<i>Bibliography</i>	317
---------------------	-----

<i>Index</i>	323
--------------	-----

<i>Index of Names</i>	332
-----------------------	-----

TABLES AND FIGURES

Tables

1	Attendance at <i>He</i> rites	43
2	Fruit House and dance	48
3	<i>He</i> House	74
4	The instruments used at <i>He</i> House	143

Figures

1	The longhouse setting	29
2	Plan of the longhouse interior	50
3	<i>He</i> rites and the seasonal cycle	66
4	Kinship relations and household affiliation of men present at <i>He</i> House	71
5	Yagé Mother	78
6	Yurupary instruments	135
7	The construction of a Barasana <i>He</i> flute	136
8	Engraved designs on Barasana <i>He</i> flutes	137
9	Instruments used by the Saliva Indians during mortuary rites	138
10	The <i>He</i> world	142
11	The Adze (<i>Sioruhu</i>), part of the constellation Orion	145
12	The paxiuba palm with detail of buttress roots	158
13	The beeswax gourd	166
14	Links between female characters in Barasana myth	174

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35890-3 - The Palm and the Pleiades: Initiation and Cosmology in Northwest Amazonia
Stephen Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

MAPS AND PLATES

Maps

- | | | |
|---|--|----|
| 1 | Northwest Amazonia: the area of the Yurupary cult | 8 |
| 2 | The Vaupés region showing distribution of major Indian groups | 20 |
| 3 | The Pirá-paraná drainage showing location of longhouse communities attending <i>He</i> rites | 45 |

Plates*Between pp. 40 and 41*

- 1 Barasana longhouse
- 2 Fruit house
- 3 Men wearing feather crowns
- 4 Men wearing full head-dresses

The publisher and the author gratefully acknowledge the permission of Brian Moser to reproduce Plates 1, 3 and 4, and of Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt to reproduce Plate 2, which first appeared in Koch-Grünberg (1909–10) *Zwei Jahre unter den Indianern*, Vol. I, p. 315.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35890-3 - The Palm and the Pleiades: Initiation and Cosmology in Northwest Amazonia
Stephen Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

This book is an amended version of my doctoral thesis entitled 'Male Initiation and Cosmology among the Barasana Indians of the Vaupés Area of Colombia'. The thesis, submitted in May 1974, was based on fieldwork carried out in Colombia between September 1968 and December 1970 under the auspices of Cambridge University. Of this time, approximately twenty-two months was spent in the field. This field research formed part of a larger project of study of Indian groups in the Vaupés region and involved myself, my wife Christine and Peter Silverwood-Cope. The project was directed by Professor Sir Edmund Leach and financed by a grant from the Social Science Research Council. This support is gratefully acknowledged.

My first encounter with the Indians of the Vaupés came from reading Wallace's *A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Río Negro* as a boy interested in exploration and natural history. On leaving school, I travelled to Colombia and headed for Mitu, a small frontier town and capital of the Vaupés. There I spent a month living with the nearby Cubeo Indians. This short visit was enough to persuade me both that I wanted to do anthropological research and that I should return to the Vaupés, specifically to the Río Pirá-paraná. Unlike the Cubeo, the Indians there had remained largely isolated from the activities of missionaries and marginal to the rubber economy that dominated the rest of the Colombian Vaupés. The reports of the few travellers and missionaries to enter the river showed that its Indians still retained most aspects of the traditional culture once common to the region as a whole.

In 1967, when I graduated at University, Amazonia was an anthropological *terra incognita*, especially for English anthropologists with their traditional focus on Africa and Asia. One of the objectives of our research was simply to fill an important gap in the ethnographic

Preface

knowledge of Amazonia. With the exception of Goldman's pioneering work amongst the Cubeo (Goldman 1963), no extended study based on participant observation over a long period of time had ever been undertaken for any of the Tukanoan groups of Northwest Amazonia. Our intention was to study one such group in depth and, in conjunction with Peter Silverwood-Cope, to examine the reported 'symbiotic' relationship between the Tukanoans and their nomadic Makú neighbours.

At this time also, the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, in particular as applied to the study of myth, had already had a major impact upon anthropological theory in England. But whilst the theoretical ideas were familiar enough, the ethnographic basis on which they were founded was not. The three volumes of *Mythologiques* that had appeared contained not only a general theory of myth but also an extended discussion of South American Indian ethnography, some of it culled from sources of doubtful quality. Our second objective, and one more directly related to the theme of this book, was to provide an empirical test for some of the grand generalisations that Lévi-Strauss had offered concerning the structure of South American Indian mythology and its relation to Indian thought and culture. The Vaupés, lying well outside the Central Brazilian culture area that forms the focal point of Lévi-Strauss's work on Amerindian myth, appeared to be an ideal location for such a test. Lévi-Strauss himself had only given passing consideration to the myths from this area.

The river Pirá-paraná, choked with dangerous rapids and inhabited by Indians who, till recently, had a reputation for fierceness, is a refuge area. During the rubber boom at the turn of the century and, to a lesser extent, during the Second World War when natural rubber was once again in great demand, the Indians suffered heavily at the hands of Colombian rubber gatherers. Houses were burned, women were abused and the men were carried away by force to work for white *patrones*. Initially, the Indians reacted with violence and later moved away from the main rivers to the side streams and headwaters. From after the war until the late 1960s, when the first Catholic and Protestant mission outposts were established in their midst, the Indians remained more or less isolated, receiving only sporadic visits from rubber gatherers and itinerant missionaries.

After an initial survey trip down the entire length of the Pirá-paraná, and including a stay amongst the Makuna of Caño Komeyaka,

Preface

my wife and I established ourselves in a Barasana longhouse on Caño Colorado where we were based for the rest of our time in the field. Our hosts, though overtly friendly, were extremely suspicious of our presence and understandably unwilling to allow us to approach them too closely and become intimate with their culture. In order to overcome their suspicions and to avoid the stereotyped relations that Indians maintain with outsiders, we tried as far as possible to adapt ourselves to the Barasana way of life. We lived inside the longhouse, ate only the food that they ate, observed their food taboos and other restrictions, dressed like them and worked with them in the daily tasks of house building, agriculture, hunting and fishing.

All our research was carried out in the Barasana language which we had to learn without the aid of interpreters or written materials. The few Indians who spoke Spanish knew only enough to conduct a basic relationship of trade. Initially, our life was physically and emotionally strenuous but as our command of the language increased and as we became familiar with our hosts and they with us, it became more and more pleasant and rewarding. As time passed, the Barasana with whom we lived became firm friends, generous with their food, their care and their time. They tolerated our mistakes, encouraged us as we learned and did their best to help us in our work. Living and working in such close contact carried with it both advantages and disadvantages. It meant that we understood things, not only because we saw them and were told about them, but also because we practised them daily. We came to know one community and its neighbours in depth. But what we gained in depth, we sacrificed in breadth. Because it took so long to establish a working relationship in one area and because we knew that it would be equally difficult elsewhere, we avoided travel except in the company of our hosts. Only towards the end of our stay did my wife go off alone to work with a Tatuyo group, affines of the Barasana, and we never visited all the Barasana longhouses, let alone all those of the other Pirá-paraná Indians.

Barasana society is rigidly divided along lines of sex. Men and women use different doors to their house, spend most of their waking lives apart from each other and are periodically and forcefully reminded of their separateness by the Yurupary rites that form the subject of this book. Working amongst them as a married couple was a distinct advantage. Minimally, it established that, in spite of being

Preface

a foreign man, I was relatively safe and had not come there to take their women. It meant that we were recognised as being mature enough to be fully incorporated into adult life even though our lack of children was the subject of ribald comments. But most important of all, it meant that we became familiar with Barasana society from the point of view of both sexes. Though we never specifically divided topics of research between us, the nature of the society itself imposed a division in our work. Though my wife was barred from secret male ritual, she was able to talk freely with the men and to discuss topics normally kept secret from women. But, for me, the world of women was relatively closed.

Many people have helped me in my research and in the preparation of this book. My greatest thanks go to the people of Caño Colorado, especially those of Bosco's house who took us in, fed us and taught us, all with generosity and good humour. In particular, I should like to record my gratitude to Bosco, Pau, Pasico and Maximilliano, my teachers. Hereafter, in order to protect my informants, I have changed their names.

Professor Sir Edmund Leach, as teacher, supervisor, colleague and friend, has given me unfailing support, advice and encouragement ever since I first went to Amazonia some fourteen years ago. My warmest thanks are due to him.

Many people made our work in Colombia not only possible but also more enjoyable. Special thanks are due to Professor Gerado Reichel-Dolmatoff for his advice and encouragement; to Dr F. Marquez-Yanez and others of the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología who gave official support and who helped in many other ways besides; to the University of the Andes who provided office space and other facilities; to Dr F. Medem who offered hospitality and encouragement and who identified animals; to Mr and Mrs Alec Bright, the Bahamón family, Nina de Friedemann, Horacio and Isobel Calle and many more.

We received help, advice and hospitality from many individuals connected with the Javerian Mission of Yarumal and the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Special thanks are due to Monseñor Bellarmino Corréa and Padre Manuel Elorza of the Prefectura Apostólica del Vaupés and to Joel and Nancy Stolte and Richard and Connie Smith of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. We owe also

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35890-3 - The Palm and the Pleiades: Initiation and Cosmology in Northwest Amazonia
Stephen Hugh-Jones

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

a special debt to George DeVoucalla and fellow pilots of the SIL for their skill, courage and helpfulness.

A number of people have read my Ph.D. thesis and offered advice, suggestions and helpful criticism which I have tried to incorporate in this book. My thanks to Professor J. Pitt-Rivers and Dr P. Rivière, my thesis examiners, to Professor C. Lévi-Strauss, and to Kaj Århem, Bernard Arcand, Ellen Basso, Patrice Bidou, Irving Goldman, Jean Jackson, Pierre-Yves Jacopin, Joanna Kaplan, Tom Langdon, Peter Silverwood-Cope and Terry Turner. Thanks also to Professor J. Goody for encouragement and for allowing me time to write.

Finally I must thank my wife Christine for her fundamental contributions to every aspect of this work. We planned our research together, worked together in the field and pooled all our data. In writing this book, I have drawn freely on data from her notebooks and constantly discussed aspects of my work with her, and she has given up her time and work to enable me to write.

Cambridge
August 1977

S.H.-J

ORTHOGRAPHY

The Barasana orthography used in this book follows that developed by Richard Smith (n.d.) of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. This orthography uses symbols chosen to conform to that of Colombian Spanish. For English readers I have substituted the symbols ‘h’ and ‘ny’ for ‘j’ and ‘ñ’; I have also not used the symbol ‘q’ as it has the same value as ‘k’ which I use instead of ‘c’.

Vowels

<i>Un-nasalised</i>	<i>Nasalised</i>
a as in <i>mask</i>	ã
e as in <i>egg</i>	ẽ
i as in <i>ink</i>	ĩ
o as in <i>orange</i>	õ
u as in <i>scoop</i>	ũ
ụ similar to German ü	ụ̃

Consonants

b	similar to <i>buy</i> but with prenasalisation (mb)
k	as in <i>kite</i>
d	prenasalised as in <i>and</i>
g	as in <i>go</i> but with prenasalisation (ng)
h	as in <i>house</i>
m	as in <i>man</i> (phonologically a variant of b, conditioned by a contiguous nasalised vowel)
n	as in <i>nose</i> (phonologically a variant of d, conditioned by a contiguous nasalised vowel)
ng	as in <i>tongue</i> (phonologically a variant of g, conditioned by a contiguous nasalised vowel)
ny	as in Spanish <i>mañana</i> (phonologically a variant of y, conditioned by a contiguous nasalised vowel)
p	as in <i>pen</i>
r	between r and l in English
s	similar to English ts as in <i>boats</i>
t	as in <i>time</i>
w	as in <i>wine</i>
y	as in <i>yam</i>

Where animals, plants, musical instruments, and the sun and moon act as people in the context of myth and ritual, I have used capital letters.